

random notes for a manifesto for now...

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These are some notes, in no particular order, for the “manifesto for now” discussion. i should say at the outset that i’m a believer in capitalism (but, controlled capitalism).

1 some "meta" thoughts

1.1 three ways of deciding on our goals

first, political (Marxist, whatever).

the second two are psychological and/or spiritual.

the first way of looking at things (which would be my nature) takes as a given that progress is good. the goal is continue to progress and to distribute the fruits of progress equitably.

the second two ways allow one to question the social benefits of progress. we can ask the question, “are we happier today than 200 years ago?”.

1.2 three ways of achieving our goals

first, reforming the current system.

second, transforming (revolution) the current system.

third, opting out of the current system, creating alternative culture/economy.

in the 60s, these three ways led to conflict between people choosing the different ways. in particular, those of us who chose revolution were irritated by those who chose to try to reform the system from within. and, we viewed those who dropped out as being nihilists, not serious, beneath contempt.

it would be nice if going forward we were able to avoid one or the other schism. i.e., either all pull in the same direction (unlikely – we’re a fairly motley crew), or be appreciative of the fact that the other two boats only added impetus to our own efforts.

2 the body politic

my sense is that America (maybe most societies) works best in the long run when there are multiple centers of power, none dominating, that cooperate and compete for varied interests.

since 1962, when the Port Huron Statement was written, we’ve seen a massive decay in labor unions, one of the previous centers of power. for all

the corruption in labor unions (as in any large organization), they provided a balance against some of the business interests.

John Lancaster in his “Whoops” talks about the disappearance of the Soviet Union in the 1980s/1990s as allowing (primarily Anglo-American) capitalist societies to move away from social democratic ideals (lip service, if you prefer).

since 1962, there has been a concentration of wealth in the hands of huge, global businesses and, currently, financial institutions.

we need a new form of “trust busting”, similar to that at the end of the 19th century that broke up Standard Oil, etc. in this case, not necessarily because of monopolistic practices, but because large is, itself, bad for society, for the body politic. the current financial crisis talks about banks being “too large” (or “too interconnected”) to fail. here, the concept is, “too large to govern”.

we need some solution to the problem of funding political campaigns. even before Citizen United large campaign donations were a problem. plus, politicians spend way too much of their time fund raising. we want politicians to be working on our behalf, not spending **all** their time trying to get re-elected.

3 the end of empire

we all probably, in some deep way, believe that the economy will recover and we will sail on. but, what if that doesn’t happen? what if we have to live with what we’ve got, and no more?

obviously, this will be an impetus to more wars, attempting to take what others have (what morally belongs to us; “how did our oil get under their sand?”).

but, this may also be an opportunity for us to move away from our current consumer-oriented culture, to one of allocating a finite pool of resources amongst ourselves. (hopefully equitably.)

4 the environment

the way we collectively live is destroying the indestructible – the planet on which we live. we used to think, heck, the ocean is **so** big, so unbelievably **huge**, that whatever poisons we dump in the ocean, it can absorb without so much as blinking. but, we have become so numerous that the little bit each of us contributes (in terms of refined or synthetic oils, pesticides, toxic

leaking from disposed-of batteries, etc.) – that little bit from each of us is amplified so much that in fact we are overwhelming the ocean. and, what is true for the ocean is as true for the atmosphere, the land, rivers, etc.

similarly, what we extract was sustainable when there were fewer of us on the planet, but now threatens to deplete the stocks of those items. we are on the verge of wars over water in many parts of the world; we’ve depleted many of the aquifers in the US west, for example. (this is, to some extent, an argument for actively working to decrease the number of people in the world, in particular, in the west.)

one concrete goal is to get off carbon-based fuels as soon as possible. these fuels accelerate global warming (are they the main drivers of global warming?) and, as the underground supply of the coal, natural gas, and petroleum for these fuels decreases, we are driven to more and more destructive methods of extracting them (mountain top removal to access coal; fracking to extract natural gas; etc.).

5 humanity/humane-ity

a constant feature of humanity seems to be “us” versus “them”, “othering” a group. presumably some deep insecurity, fear of scarcity, fear for the fate of our (current) abundance, drives this. (i think this is something the Dalai Lama has been looking at for years, using traditional religious, psychological, as well as modern scientific methods).

problems of racism, male chauvinism, homophobia, etc., all seem related to this.

(there is a theory that social safety nets have been so generous in northern European countries precisely because the populations of those countries are so homogeneous. i don’t know if, with the immigration-induced increasing diversity in those countries over the past few decades, popular [“native”] support for those safety nets has diminished.)

we need to work to embrace humane-ity. this can’t be legislated. but, to the extent we understand the causes, maybe we can institute policies that deal with, e.g., people’s underlying fears of scarcity, etc.

6 capitalism

capitalism is a bit like Churchill’s judgment about democracy – the worst way to structure a large and technologically advanced society, except for every other one we’ve ever tried.

the profit motive is a powerful incentive to innovation for the common good (or, what we assume to be “good”). this is the baby that must not be thrown out with the bath water.

capitalism is a tool we use. depending on how we use it, it can produce good, bad, a mixture. (well, it will always produce a mixture.) various ways of using it are taxation policies, controls on corporate governance, etc.

7 education

in the 19th century, a grade school education may have been required in order to escape poverty and/or grinding work and work hours. in the 20th century, this may have been a high school education. in the 21st century, a college education is something required for the upper [some] percentage of the jobs in our economy. just as society provided primary and secondary education in the 19th and 20th centuries [what was provided when?], society should provide, at a reasonable cost, college and post-graduate education for today’s students.

high quality universities have always been key to keeping the US a leader in developing new technologies. for our country to invest in education is a way of investing in the future – an investment in education today can return positive benefits in the future. economists might say that the costs of supporting education are a capital, not an operational, expense. in focusing on the positive economic benefits of education, it is important not to think this means only science and engineering education.

in addition, an educated populace is more likely to prove an informed electorate. similar to the argument about jobs, the issues in the 21st century are more sophisticated than those of the 19th century, and the 21st-century definition of “educated” must reflect that.

as important as education is, it is important to keep in mind that not all dignified careers require a college education. additionally, it can be the case that the promise of “improvement through [college] education” can be a way of gulling the populace, promising but never delivering. this may particularly be true if we are facing the “end of the empire”.

8 health care

we all (the entire country) are tired of this debate. on the left, we got something (“Obamacare”) and we are wishing and hoping the benefits of it become apparent to our fellow citizens before a Republican administration

has a chance to dismantle it. on the right, the hope is to dismantle Obamacare as soon as possible, before it bloats the government even more.

however, the problem of health care costs itself is not going away. the government's largest unfunded liability looking forward is Medicare (a very popular government program). for the good of everybody's wallet, we need substantially everybody in the country to have access to good preventive health care – to prevent serious illness when possible, or to catch serious illnesses early, when they can be treated at a lower cost. “health care costs are social costs.”

what is the answer? it's hard to say. we should be looking for a system of controlled costs, either single payer, or multiple payers, but a single government-negotiated price list, with the multiple payers required to earn a no more than a small profit on basic health care coverage.

9 financial system

Re-implement Glass-Steagall. banks are inherently low-margin, high-volume (in terms of dollars that pass through their hands every day) businesses (which add up low risk) and should go back to that. riskier financial institution should not have any government-sponsored insurance.

10 tax policy

the growth of the divide between rich and poor (or even rich and not-poor) over the past 30-40 years is bad for society. the middle class – to which the poor can reasonably aspire to arrive – is the base of social stability. a country with only an upper class and a lower class (think of S. America or, apparently, Lebanon in the 60s/70s) will produce little happiness and much unrest (and demagoguery).

in order to move towards a more equitable society, we should radically increase the highest marginal tax rate. rates of 90-95% would not be unreasonable. entrepreneurs (“the Steve Jobs of the world”) will innovate because it's in their blood. we want a system where they will have a chance to become wealthy for producing truly innovative products. we do not want a system, such as we have now, where a CEO of a company makes 100-1000 times the average non-executive salary simply for basic blocking-and-tackling.

11 corporate governance

corporations should be run to make a profit, but that should not be their only responsibility. corporations are chartered by the people, and their success is to a large extent due to starting operation, and continuing to be domiciled, in the US. this gives them a responsibility to society at large.

boards of directors should include representation from employee groups (“unions”).

corporations should have a responsibility towards all stake holders: shareholders, employees, sub-contractors, customers, citizens (neighbors), and should take responsibility for, e.g., the environment, working conditions at sub-contractors, etc., related to their operations.

we should reject the idea of “corporate personhood”. corporations should not be put on trial. people running corporations should be put on trial.

corporations should stay out of politics.

corporations should not “outsource” jobs. products produced to be sold in a country should be produced in that country.

12 military

Eisenhower, in his farewell address, invented the term “military industrial complex”, and that union has been a growing problem for our country. we should investigate some of the methods the government and military employed in WWII (none 100% successful), such as fixed price or cost plus fixed profit, for contracting new equipment. possibly we can at least get capitalists out of pushing for more armaments.

we should ban the sale by any private company of weapons overseas. this should cover small arms as well as larger armaments.

after losing the Vietnam war, the US military realized that their ability to do their job (i.e., win wars they were ordered to fight by politicians) depended on domestic US politics, on the support of the US population, and that a draft-based military made that problematic. we should go back to a draft-based military, possibly with one- or two-year national service for all citizens/residents.

13 patriotism/nationalism

we (almost) all love our countries/states/regions of origin, are proud of them, choose many of their social/political/cultural traits over those of other coun-

tries/states/regions (c/s/r from now on). this is natural and good.

at the same time, there are traits of c/s/r's of the world we find morally repugnant and speak out against. lack of rights for women and ethnic minorities, capital punishment, etc.

the challenge is to express our love of our own c/s/r in a non "God-is-on-our-side" way. and, our opposition to specific traits of other c/s/r's in a non "your c/s/r is bad" way.

i think this is important because i think solutions are primarily national/regional. we organize ourselves – and our solutions – at these levels because our cultural affinity shapes our view of which of a multitude of possible solutions to a problem are found to be "acceptable". but, we shouldn't (normally) see solutions as "better", just different, temperamentally suited to our particular culture.

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